The Court of King Max

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PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

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Gone to find a Sword.

Love you both.

— Max

Those were the last words that she ever said to her parents, or rather scrawled in the middle of the night, and left on her bed for them to find.

There's an idea that the scariest period when somebody disappears is the first forty-eight hours. The reason for this is that, if not found, the chances of someone's survival get significantly smaller. If you were to ask Max's parents, the worst feeling comes from the weeks that follow. The unknowing. The could-bes, the maybes, the wondering whether or not someday she's going to walk back through that door.

The only hope they had that their young daughter would come home was the note she'd left. She had a goal. They could only hope she'd not only succeed, but come home once she shad.

* * *

Max was struggling with living on the streets. Nobody deserved to be on their own like this, but Max knew she had to go. There wasn't an exact reason, just a clawing feeling in the back of her mind that kept her pressing forward. Her sword was out there, somewhere, she just had to track it down and find it.

That had gotten harder since the recent break-out. She hadn't heard much about it before she left home, but her understanding was that a certain 'Happiness Foundation' had let out a bunch of inmates, and were now trying to round them up like wild cats. Max didn't understand it herself, but the amount of wannabe soldiers on the street had her worried. It was getting harder to tell who was and wasn't police — she'd always known that if they caught her, she'd be sent home from her quest, but, if the Happiness Foundation confused her for an inmate, that'd be the least of her concerns.

It was this constant worry, this fear that she'd be seen in these parks or scrapyards before her mission was complete, that forced Max to leave town. Not too far — that'd get in the way of her quest, after all — but she couldn't stay at home. She trudged through the mud beside the road, soaked through with rain but growing more determined with every footstep. She could feel that clawing feeling still, getting louder with every step. Always in the right direction.

That didn't stop the journey feeling mind numbing. Max had rationed their phone battery as best she could, but that had died days ago and the trees were not providing ample entertainment. It would've been better to carpool, but the journey could overshoot her destination, not to mention the problem of trusting a driver… Ultimately, the risks around the journey weren't what she wanted to focus on.

Another service station was in front of her. The dirty white building with the red rooftop provided a good rest-stop, somewhere she could refill her water and take a break before continuing onwards. That should've been her focus, but Max found herself drawn elsewhere.

* * *.

The large metal bins behind the service station rattled as Lotto rummaged around inside of them. She — that was new, 'she', busy day — rummaged around the rubbish like a raccoon in summer, throwing out cans and tins galore behind her. It left a wonderful trail for anybody that dared to approach her, but who would? Lotto was aware of just how deranged she looked; the hospital gown alone… especially now it was torn and stained… Well, the battered brown jacket would cover that up when needed. Let her blend in.

"No," she grumbled as she searched. "No, no… Ah! There ya go!"

She stood up like a lightning bolt, smiling as she held the plastic bag in her hands.

"No holes! *Finally*!"

Lotto turned on her heel to climb out of the bin, only to go wide eyed at the girl watching her. She couldn't be any older than fifteen, curly blonde hair decorating her spotty face. The red hoodie looked nice on her, if not drowned from the rain.

"Oh… hello," Lotto said meekly. How long had it been since she'd last talked to somebody?

"Are you okay?" Max asked, confused by the woman in front of her.

"Yes! Don't worry, I'm *wunderbar*!" Lotto said, climbing out of the bin. "Or as they say in Germany, *wunderbar*!"

"You said that already."

"Did I? Busy day, sorry. Can you hold this?"

Lotto wasted no time shoving the plastic bag into Max's hands, quickly getting on her hands and knees as she grabbed the tins and cans from the ground.

Max wasn't sure why she was holding it, hands tightening around the plastic bag. She should've been leaving, but found herself choosing to stay. That clawing feeling hadn't disappeared by any means, there was just an impulse to remain. "Do you work here?"

"Nope!"

"Then what are you doing with the trash?"

"Recycling! More or less," Lotto argued. Explanations were unnecessary, especially when it was just a kid passing through.

"Maybe I can help then," Max offered.

"Oh! Really? All you need to do is hold the bag." Lotto dumped the trash into the bag and quickly snatched it back, shaking her head. No, this needed to be dealt with herself. "Thank you for your time," she quickly said, before turning on her heels and stomping off into the woods.

As Lotto stormed off on her own and disappeared into the trees, that should've been where things finished for Max. Max should've walked off on her own, continuing on her quest and tracking down the sword. If she could do that, then things would get better. But, as Lotto got further and further away, Max felt a different compulsion in her mind. Her quest was important, of course, but this strange woman rummaging through the garbage…

She found herself putting one foot in front of the other.

* * *

The joys of recycling and improvisation brought Lotto out into the middle of these woods. She didn't have a name for it, nor did she have anything like a bed or clean clothes that she could change into. No, she made do with this little den instead. A small burrow nestled beneath the roots of a tree, big enough that she could crawl through at least and make it into a larger opening. This was her current sanctuary.

What a dump.

The only saving grace was her model village. It wasn't much, mostly because she still didn't know where she was, but it was a start. One man's trash was another woman's treasure, all the perfect pieces for a map that nobody else would understand. An empty can for a city centre, a series of crushed pieces of glass forming every building and strewn away cardboard on the roads. To anybody else, it'd feel like nonsense, but Lotto understood it perfectly.

She placed the strewn away chess piece onto the map just outside of the city. The Happiness Facility, where she'd been before. Where *he* had been.

No time to get stuck on that.

Lotto had to find her friends. Even where they *might* be would be enough for her to work with. Once she got them back and knew they were safe, she could take the fight to the Happiness Facility and figure out what they were doing, figure out why all those people were locked up.

"You live here?"

Lotto let out a yelp and instinctively threw part of her map at the voice. The thunk of a metal can bouncing off of Max's head brought her back to reality, the kid rolling onto their back and into the mud.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Lotto yelled out, rushing out of her burrow. "Actually, no, I'm not! What are you doing following me? Where are your parents?"

Max helped herself back onto her feet, rubbing the small cut that the can had made on her forehead.

"They're not here!" she huffed back. "I'm on my own. They'd just get in the way."

"Oh? Oh… I see what this is."

Lotto softened immediately, her annoyance turned to warmth as she moved to Max and took her hand. *Time to be the responsible one.*

"Running away won't solve whatever problem you've got going," she told the girl, perhaps a little bluntly.

"Hey, I'm not running away!"

"You're not?"

"No!"

"Oh," said Lotto. She blinked. "Well, that rather undercuts what I was going to say. …What are you supposed to be doing here, then?"

"Looking for a sword."

Lotto's brow furrowed. If it wasn't for how candid the young lady had been so far, she'd presume that she was trying to joke at her expense. "A sword? I don't see how you're going to find something like that anywhere." She shrugged. "Except an arcade, maybe, for a couple hundred tokens. Try that, maybe. I'd go with, but I'm busy."

"Wh — I don't mean a toy!" Max protested, as Lotto turned away and started cleaning her make-do map. "A real sword! A *magic* sword!"

Her insistence did little to help her case as the homeless woman finished cleaning up. Even for a young lady, she could tell the thought process happening behind her eyes. Lotto was going to move away somewhere and try to disappear, just so she couldn't be followed. Max didn't like that. She wasn't even sure why, but she knew she had to stay with the woman.

"I'm close, too!" she insisted. "I can *feel* it's nearby!"

"Oh, can you now?" Lotto scoffed.

"Yes!" Max snapped. "Somewhere *very* nearby. The sword is buried somewhere, I think. If I can just remember where, then —"

Her thought was cut off as Lotto swiftly turned to face her, bending slightly to meet Max's gaze. "What did you say?"

Max froze. Whether it was the smell or the sudden eye contact, Lotto suddenly felt much more uncomfortable to be around. "Um, I just need to remember where —"

"No no, not that! Before that!"

"The sword is nearby, I know it is!"

"How do you know?"

"I… I just do! I can feel it!" she insisted, stepping back from Lotto to avoid the smell.

Lotto followed, speaking quickly. "A real, proper feeling? Not just wishes and hope, you actually *feel* the sword? Okay, where is it? Point in a direction!"

Max hesitated. *Forward.* That was all Max had ever thought about that instinct, it was just wherever her feet would fall. It wasn't as simple as pointing north or south, it was about finding the right direction by instinct. Still, someone was

finally listening to her. It was refreshing. Trusting her own instincts again, Max took a breath and merely pointed into the woods.

Without another word, Lotto began walking where Max had pointed. She dropped her collection of junk, a new motivation in mind.

"You coming?" she called out to Max, looking back at her.

"You… you're really going to help?" Max asked in shock. "Why? Nobody has."

"Call it a good feeling," she responded. "If you want help, at least."

Max didn't know this woman. She didn't know if she could trust her, stranger-danger was still a very heavy shadow that was cast over since she'd begun her quest. Yet having somebody trust her — seemingly believe her — it was… invigorating. Max held back a smile, following on.

"Your hip better not give out," she crudely joked as she passed by.

"Oh, an age joke! Classy, very mature!" her newfound partner groaned. "You can call me Lotto."

"King Max."

"King?" Lotto raised her eyebrows appreciatively. "Suits you."

* * *

The pair had wandered onwards for what felt like hours, deeper and deeper into the forest. To say it was a comfortable experience would have been roughly as appropriate as calling a fire nice and chilly. Perhaps Lotto could handle it as well as she did because of the time she'd already spent getting comfortable on the streets — what's another smudge when your clothes are already filthy? Or perhaps she was just bigger, stronger, sturdier. Max, for her part, was clearly struggling. Her feet sank into the muddy ground with every step, and she regularly tripped over hidden branches, her frustration growing with every slip, stain and fall.

It was Max's tenth fall that led Lotto to finally catch her, grabbing onto the back of her jumper and holding her up from there.

"You really should've left in better shoes, kid. "Sneakers are good, sure, but they wear out quickly."

"I can handle a few blisters," Max snapped, and staggered back onto her feet, only to slide ever so casually down the sloping ground. "Thank you, anyway."

Lotto responded with a smile, ruffingly Max's hair gently. "I don't know how you keep yourself to it," she admitted as she passed Max, grabbing onto a large stick and using it to help her balance. "You're a kid! You should be at home, hanging out with friends, going out places."

"Yeah, that's not really been a thing for me lately," Max admitted as she carefully stepped to catch up.

"Why not?"

"I moved, recently. My family reached Walter's Hope a couple months ago, that's when —"

She was swiftly cut off as Lotto yelped an "A-ha!", spinning around on her feet and splashing mud around her. "Say that again!"

"We moved into Walter's Hope," Max repeated, before once again being cut off.

"Walter's Hope!! The name of the city, yes?" She asked, which Max answered with a nod. "Oh, finally! Do you know how hard it is for people to answer your questions when you look like… well, this?"

"I can imagine," Max mumbled. "How do you not know where we are?"

"Oh, I'm still figuring stuff out," Lotto admitted. "I think I used to remember, then I had this other idea and it dominated everything."

"What other idea?"

"That I was an alien." To hear that so casually, Lotto thought, would finally knock Max back. She was almost disappointed when she turned to see Max, uncaring about the comment, but hid that appropriately. "You don't seem surprised."

"I'm looking for a sword," she reiterated, "You could be an alien."

"Swords are a lot more realistic than aliens!"

Max responded with a shrug, just walking along. Once again, Lotto was worried about her. She was well aware of the responsibility she now had, looking after this young girl, as they walked deeper into the woods. If something happened, Lotto knew she'd give up her anonymity to help her. It was more a question of *how* Lotto could help if Max ended up in proper danger.

Then again, how much of Max's story was actually true? There had been more people than Lotto cared to admit at the Happiness Facility, some more ridiculous than others. Max could've just been one of the youngest victims of the institute, bound to an area that Lotto never saw. If that was the case, what were the chances of the sword being real? Of there really being a sword in the middle of nowhere?

Better yet, what did that say about Lotto's own self-admitted delusions? If their whole body could change…

The sound of a gunshot dragged Lotto out of their thoughts, attention turning to behind them. Where previously there'd been nothing, a single man stood, rifle in hand and covered from head to toe with white body armour.

"Don't shoot, you idiot!" yelled the soldier's commanding officer, a captain, as another half-dozen soldiers poured out from behind trees and into the grove. "Both of you, down on the ground!"

Unlike his troops', the Captain's helmet was off, revealing an older man, his bald head glistening in the moonlight. His beard was as thick and brown as the treeline itself; altogether, he looked quite unlike a conventional soldier, and every

bit the hired mercenary he was. The symbol of the Happiness Facility was branded on every soldier's chestplate.

"What sorta hospital has an army?" Max said in shock — fearful, for the first time, as she hid behind Lotto.

Lotto didn't answer. She just grabbed Max and ran forward.

"Stop them!" the captain yelled, and his lapdogs obediently followed. While only a couple began to run, the others wasted no time opening fire at the pair. The only thing that saved Max was that Lotto dared to shield her whole body in front of the young girl. Equally, the only thing protecting Lotto was the many trees they had to dart past. But, if gunfire didn't hit her, splinters would.

"Why are they shooting at us?!"

"They're not shooting at you," Lotto corrected. "Just me!"

"Fine! Why are they trying to kill *you?*"

Lotto huffed, a branch exploding from gunfire overhead.

"Oh, they've killed me before, I'll be fine!"

"*WHAT*?!"

Before Max could dare ask, her foot twisted. She fell onto the ground and rolled. Lotto tried to grab her, she couldn't risk leaving Max behind to get caught in the crossfire, only for the ground to fall. The branches and leaves beneath their feet fell away and they both rolled head over heel.

Max in that moment, with sharp branches sticking into her back and tears in her eyes, finally started to regret her quest. Maybe she'd gone too far, maybe they'd need to turn back. But the option was pulled further away the further down the hill she fell — the louder the soldiers yelled, the further she sunk into her mission. She should've stayed at home.

Max missed her mum and dad.

Their hectic impromptu slide finished with a wet splash, the pair rolling into the mud like they'd been thrown off of their feet. Lotto pushed herself up fast, spitting mud out her mouth, and dug her fingers into the ground.

"Okay," she huffed. "Time to focus."

"Focus on what?!" Max spluttered out, struggling onto her feet. "We need to run!"

"Oh, we're gonna run. Lots of running, just not where they want us to run."

"What are you talking about?!"

"*Think*!" Lotto shot back, zooming over in front of Max and helping her to stand. "Ignore the gunfire, focus on me, focus on my voice. How did you know to come here? How did you know to look for the sword *here*?"

"I… I don't know," she admitted.

Focusing on Lotto, that wasn't exactly easy. Her attention moved over to the trees that circled around them, to the marks in the ground, to the yells and angry screams of doctors-turned-soldiers overhead. They were getting closer, Max knew it.

"Yes you do," Lotto insisted. "You remembered it'd be here, didn't you?"

"It was just an idea, it's a gut instinct."

"Yeah, ideas are tricky though," Lotto said, stepping back slowly through the mud. "The line between ideas and memories isn't really a line, more blurry, more of a suggestion!"

She smiled, the cogs noisily turning in her brain as she thought… before dropping into the mud, scooping it out the way.

"What the hell are you doing?" Max said, trying not to grow worried at the almost-manic excitement on Lotto's face.

"I had an idea! Come on, dig!"

Max groaned but relented, far too fast for her own liking she noted. She slid down beside Lotto and started digging with her hands, pulling mud away and piling up around them. The deeper down they dug, the less both were pooling out mud and more water was being thrown away from themselves.

"Lotto! This is *crazy*! We should be *running*."

"Max, this whole *place* is crazy. Ever since I woke up here, it's been insane! I've met Alice from Wonderland, I've met the one-man Beatle, I've seen brutes and mosaic men and doctors with guns!" Lotto paused for breath and stared at Max for a moment. The poor girl was terrified, that was clear by the look of her, never mind the tears welling in her eyes. "And I've met a young girl who ran away from home looking for a magic sword. Maybe it's crazy, sure, but the rules are breaking down around here. Something's happening and I think we can find out what."

"By digging."

"Sorta." Lotto looked down at the hole in the ground. It was hardly muddy anymore, just pure blue water. It looked almost bottomless, the deep blue travelling down beyond where light could reach. "You can turn back," Lotto offered, "and that would be totally fair. Keep running, or even go back to them and go back home."

Max looked up at the top of the hill. Silhouettes were arriving, growing shadows. The way back home was through that mass of violence.

"I still trust you more than them," she admitted, taking Lotto's hand.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she joked, digging her other arm into the water before telling Max to "think of a lake for me".

Max did so with ease, the vision pushing through her mind quickly. She pictured a pure blue lake, the sun shining bright above it. Details pushed through the longer she focused — an island sat in the middle of the water, and Max knew it was where her heart had been calling to. Fish swam beneath the water, large and constantly moving.

And then, there was a woman. Deep blue scaled skin, like a fish trying to blend into the murky depths. Her dress was torn and ragged with age, yet she looked no older than Max herself. Even in her mind's eye, the woman gave a welcoming smile.

"Thing is," Lotto finally explained as she fished through the small puddle with her other arm, "your whole fantasies with the sword and quest and king, it all sounds a bit King Arthur. And if the lines really starting to blur that much…"

"I can picture us an escape," Max realised, not dropping her focus for a second. "I can create a lake."

"And somebody inside of it," Lotto said confidently.

"Down here!" a soldier yelled, "I found them!"

He, along with a dozen others, swiftly started sliding down the mud to try and catch up. They just weren't fast enough. Their captain reached the top of the hill as their soldiers reached the bottom, just in time to see an impossible sight. Lotto held tightly onto Max, not wanting her to be left behind. The deep blue hand of the woman in Max's mind wrapped around Lotto's other hand as she searched and, without a moment's notice, pulled with enough strength to drag Lotto into the puddle. Max followed swiftly after, the water splashing up and covering the soldiers as they sunk into the ground, pulled in by Lotto.

"What the Hell —!?" the Captain blurted out — but then he steeled his nerves. Impossible miracles were one thing; his job was another. He turned to his troops "Well? What are you louts staring at? *After them*!"

It was far too late. When one soldier dropped to their knees and fished into the puddle, they watched the water turn brown and viscous around their arm.

"I don't understand," they called out, "It's like… It's just mud, sir!"

The Captain arrived by his side and pushed him away, growling in contempt.

"That's *impossible*…"

* * *

Max couldn't swim. Soaked through with mud and disoriented, the realisation that water surrounded her from head to toe horrified her. She screamed, but no sound came out. She thrashed in the water, but sank like a rock. She couldn't tell up from down, blinded by the dirty water that forced her to lock her eyes shut. She was trapped at the bottom of the lake.

She didn't know whose hand grabbed hers; she couldn't tell. The hand was too large to be Lotto's, but it was still ungloved, so it couldn't belong to one of the soldiers. They pulled, and Max followed. She had no other choice, not as lungs began to fill with the muddy water. She felt like she was being dragged down again and it horrified her, for that brief moment, that Lotto might've had ill intentions behind whatever she'd encouraged Max to do. What if the real intentions were to end her story? To drown the king?

For a brief second, Avalon entered her mind.

Then she felt the sun against her skin, lungs flooded with air as she coughed up mud.

It was sunnier, yet colder than Max remembered. In fact, it felt remarkably more British.

"Avalon?" she mumbled.

That was impossible, it couldn't have been. And yet it had to be.

Her ears were filled with water but, through it all, she could hear laughter still. The hand let go, and, as Max looked down into the water, she could barely make out the figure that saved her. Max didn't have the chance to give her thanks before the lady of the lake gave a single nod and smile. She peacefully sank down into the water. Max would never have the chance to see her again. Still, that laughter erupted through her ears and she had to focus. Lotto was just as disheveled as she was, the pair finally matching. Her ginger hair was coated in mud that sank between the roots. Her clothes looked torn apart, yet still they clung to her body like a second skin.

"Brilliant!" she hollered, "King, you're brilliant!"

"But what did I do?"

"Opened a doorway to Avalon!" Lotto called proudly. "I can't believe that actually worked, it's just a theory, but a theory proven true. Your conviction — your *mind*, Max! It was so strong that it gave us precisely the exit we needed!"

Lotto was far too busy celebrating, so Max found herself solving it. "I willed it into existence? I created the entirety of Avalon inside of a puddle?"

"A puddle made a lake, a child raised a kingdom."

"But that's impossible!"

"Not impossible," Lotto reassured, "Just unlikely."

Max had a dozen questions as they swam towards the shore of Avalon, but Lotto either didn't know the answer or waved it off without a second thought. What mattered really, according to her, was that they'd bought themselves some time. Max made it to the shore first, groaning as she shook off the water. With the sun shining brightly above her, she at least would dry off soon she thought. Lotto hardly helped by swinging her jacket around, dirty water flying off of her and splashing onto Max.

"Huh, I look good with brown hair," she hummed as she pulled mud from her head.

Max didn't notice whatever Lotto said. She noticed, instead, the hospital gown she wore.

"Oh. Lotto — I — it was you! You they wanted!"

Lotto blinked. "I said, didn't I?"

"I thought you just meant they wouldn't kill me 'cause I was a kid! But they weren't just willing to kill you, they were out there *looking* for you," she finally realised. "We were being shot at because they *wanted* you."

"Oh yes," Lotto said. There would have been no point in lying, even if she'd wanted to. And she didn't think she *did* want to lie to Max.

"B-but if they're really after you, then they'll follow us!"

"I know," Lotto said. She promptly sat down on the sand, sighing deeply.

"What are you doing?"

"Sitting."

"But w-we can't just stay here."

Lotto looked at her with a reassuring smile.

"It's okay," she promised. "Like I said before, it's not you they're after. You can find the sword from here, complete your story. If they figure out how to come through, I'll deal with them."

Max wanted to argue, but paused. She couldn't argue — it wouldn't be safer to find what she was looking for, but she didn't know where to look. "I can't just… wander through the hills of England, can I?"

"Oh, you'll know where to go," Lotto reassured her. "Trust your own instincts. Besides, we're probably still in America. You didn't overwrite England, at least I really hope not — just actualised an idealised version of it in a dimensional pocket of some kind. At a guess."

"No clue what that means," Max huffed, before kneeling next to Lotto. She hesitated, the words sticking in her throat. "Thank you," she strained out. "I don't know how you knew all this, but thank you."

"Just go," Lotto said with a smile. "You'll be home before you know it."

Max gave a nod then got onto her feet. If she trusted her heart, then direction wasn't the name of the game. The only way she needed to go was forward. Back to one foot in front of the other.

* * *

Her heart was her compass as she wandered deeper into these woods. Max tried so hard to keep her mind focused on the sword, but how could her mind not wander? An island hidden inside of a puddle — an island she'd manifested — it could contain anything. The crunch of branches around her could've been giants, or the sound of birdsong could've been the cries of a griffin. Even through this, Max focused. If she let her thoughts become too vivid, she feared what might manifest next.

The thunderous stomp nearby strengthened those fears.

But however strong her fears were, her curiosity was reinforced cement. She could afford to steal a peek, no? Even in her heart, she felt the need to, felt that longing to know. Whatever was stomping through this island, it was big enough to scare the birds away. It made the ground shake, branches shivering on the ground with each footstep. It moved in a rhythm, one that she should be able to copy easily. They were slow and steady stomps, ones that hid her tip-toeing through the woodlands.

She moved to the bushes and pushed them aside, before crawling through a small gap of brambles. Max burrowed her way through the branches and berries, fingers digging into the mud, inching closer and closer. Her heart was thunderous in her chest, loud enough to be heard in her head. Any other day, she'd fear a bad headache, but today had been so different. Today had been an adventure — why would she want to stop now?

Thud!!

As her head was pushing through the other side of this bush, a large foot fell in front of her. It was pure rock, jagged and covered in moss, heavy enough to sink into the mud by simply standing. Another foot fell next to it and stopped, rocks and pebbles falling freely off the side of it. Max covered her mouth as this massive creature stopped, a deep groaning echoing out in front of her. She didn't dare move, speak, or even breathe. If she was lucky, she'd remain unseen.

Lucky? She was anything but.

She screamed as a three fingered hand crushed the brambles around her and tore the bush out of the ground, throwing it away like trash in the wind. She rolled onto her feet and ran quickly back, staring up at the creature. What faced Max was titanic, as tall as the trees it walked beside, held together by the same green as the vines around them. It had the idea of a head, a large stone wedged between its shoulders with a cracked crooked smile. Replacing what should've been its other hand, the roots of a tree tangled and grew around it, the roots moving like a bundle of snakes.

Max's heart was beating out of her chest, blood pumping and adrenaline spiking. Its face cracked further, the smile breaking in half the stone and opening wide. It groaned ferociously again, before wheezing out a word.

"**KING…**"

Max froze. "You… You know me?"

It responded by landing onto its knee, more rocks falling around itself as it kneeled in front of her. The living stones lowered its head as Max stood, in a full bow.

"You know me," she repeated — a statement, now. "*How* do you know me?"

The creature didn't answer, but Max could understand that. She couldn't expect a rock to have a massive vocabulary.

"Okay. If you know me…" she prodded — "listen, I'm looking for something. Can you help me?"

It gave another groan, thoughts clearly whirring, to whatever extent they could manage.

"You know, it's hard to tell what you're thinking," Max huffed.

She wanted to investigate more and quiz its knowledge, find what she needed, until she heard a voice. An aggressive call of authority. They weren't close by, but Max recognized that the Happiness Facility had managed to find their way

through with the company of gunfire in tow. Then she heard Lotto's voice, a scream above it all, and her blood ran cold.

Max ran towards her direction, only for roots to swiftly wrap around her. She gasped, her feet being pulled from the ground, as the stone lifted her up.

"Put me down!" she demanded, but the stone ignored her. "I am your king! You will listen to me!"

"**KING…**" it groaned again, more dust falling off of it.

"Listen to me!" She demanded, punching the roots as she tried to get free. "That's my friend, she's in danger! They're going to hurt her!"

"**FRIEND…?**"

"Well…" Max didn't know why she'd said that so quickly. She'd only just met Lotto today and, even with how much had happened, she was surprised at hearing herself sound so confident in saying it. "I wouldn't have found this place if it wasn't for her. I'd never have gotten this far if she hadn't gotten me here. She helped me, I *have* to help her! I can't let her get hurt because of me!"

Still, stubbornly, this stone growled in defiance. That finally peaked Max's anger, yelling at the stone "I am your King! If you will listen to anybody, you will listen to me! I will not allow people to die in my kingdom!"

The stone pulled her in closer, growling the closer that Max was moved. But, for not even a moment, did Max's resilience falter.

"Put

me

down."

The stone's face seemed, ironically enough, to soften, the grasp of the roots faltering. Gently as possible, Max was placed onto the ground as the stone once again knelt. She would've celebrated her first use of authority, if another gunshot hadn't run out from the distance.

"I need to protect her," she demanded urgently. "I need a weapon! Can you find me one?"

The stone took a moment to understand her words before following her command. It pushed its makeshift hands into the ground and solidified. A deep groan echoed again from deep within their core as, without warning, rocks began to fall from the stone's chest. It opened up like a small cavern and revealed its contents to the King.

For the first time since she'd run away from home, Max's mind felt clear. As she saw the glint of light strike the inside of the stone's chest, she smiled.

* * *

Lotto was thrown onto the ground, white handcuffs behind her back. The gun she'd stolen was tossed into the water, fizzing and smoking as it sank deeper and deeper.

"Well, it was worth a shot," she said disappointedly, before being kicked in the head.

"Shut it!" the Captain yelled as he wiped his boot on the beach.

His other soldiers were marking out the beach, dutifully following his orders — find the girl that the patient kidnapped.

Of course she'd been kidnapped. It was the only logical explanation, especially with the danger these patients were to themselves and others. What a boon it had been to their cause, too. With such a sympathetic goal, the Facility's forces could operate more boldly than ever before, with full state backing. And they must be seen to make good use of that freedom. They *would* track down the poor, unfortunate girl, and bring the threat of the crazed escapee to an end… by any means necessary..

Lotto fidgeted on the ground, trying to move her leg to stand. Not broken — good! Doing better than her nose at the moment. She tried to sit herself up on

her knees, only for other soldiers to move over and aim their weapons at her again.

"Oh come on," she whined. "I missed all of you, don't pretend I'm a threat."

"You stole a weapon!" one of them barked back.

"It was pointed at me!"

Not caring for her argumentative nature, they hit her again. The Captain did nothing to stop it, focusing on the forest. Better to turn away from the difficult part. He pulled the radio off his uniform and tried to tune into one secure channel, then another, but all he got back was static.

"Whatever this place is, we're cut off," the Captain warned his troops. "So stay alert! The last thing we need is to be caught off-guard!"

It was the young battle cry that first caught them off guard. Two soldiers who had turned away from the forest suddenly howled in shock and then fell to the ground as Max swung the ornate silver blade through them. Before the others had time to even aim at her, another two were suddenly struck and fell in a single blow.

Lotto stared at it from the mud, as shocked as the rest of them.

"Nobody move!" Max demanded, hands gripping tightly the golden hilt of the sword, the sun gleaming off the silver blade. From some angles the sword looked ancient, yet at others it looked freshly forged. "You will leave this land," she demanded, "and abandon my advisor! If you leave as you came, I will have no quarrel with you!"

The captain moved slowly, reattaching the radio as their troops aimed at the girl. Before, maybe, Max would've been terrified. Now she had the nerves to match her sword.

"Sir, she's one of *them*," one of his troops warned, but the captain ignored him. How hard could it be to negotiate with a child?

Even as the captain approached and *tried* talking, tried reasoning, with Max, her attention remained on Lotto. She was on the ground, nose bloodied, but she was smiling. She looked almost proud. Max's iron will held back the smile she wanted to return.

"Listen," the Captain said. What had he been talking about before she arrived, Max wondered… "We can all leave and get you the help you need. Just put the sword down."

"How about, instead, you all lay down your own weapons?" Max shot back.

"How about we *all* put our weapons down?" the Captain insisted.

A bluff, of course, but he had to sell it. There was a holster on his side that he unbuckled, letting it drop into his hand. They stared at each other. He lowered himself down, onto the ground, slowly putting down the gun. His troops disagreed, but he continued to ignore them. His eyes never left hers. It was like a lion and its tamer fighting for superiority. The Captain was certain he'd win, but it wasn't Max that blinked.

When the gun hit the ground, he moved quickly to tackle the girl to the ground. Max simply moved faster, whether it be her age or the lack of armour, and she was able to practically pirouette around the captain as he fell. One of the troops yelled "Open fire!" only for Lotto to kick out his legs and knock him down. Three left. Only three.

Max made quick work of them. She hid behind one of the troops as they shot their guns, pushing them over and striking the other two with her sword, large swipes taking them to the ground. Max turned to Lotto, only to find her on top of the other guard and seeing her headbutt him, knocking him out cold. Max panted to catch her breath.

"You found it then?" Lotto said cheerily.

"It found me," Max corrected, dropping the sword onto the ground for a moment and falling to her knees. "My chest hurts."

Lotto was by her side quickly, resting by her. She couldn't place her hand on her shoulder, but Lotto could offer support still.

"I'm here," she promised, "Take deep breaths and calm yourself down."

"In a second."

"Why in a —"

Lotto was cut off by Max's sudden fury. She picked the sword off the ground swiftly and spun back onto her feet, slashing behind her. Lotto screamed, falling onto her back and into the mud… as the Captain fell limp next to her.

"Is he dead?" Lotto asked, looking him over.

Despite Max's massive slash and the way the Captain remained limp, there wasn't even the sign of a cut.

"Are you kidding?" Max said incredulously, falling onto her back with a sigh. "I didn't kill him, I'm fifteen! I didn't kill anybody!"

She panted, not wanting to raise her head to even bother checking. That was terrifying and exhausting and her heart wouldn't stop beating. Her brain was going a million miles a minute.

"Then how did…?" Lotto only had to look at the soldiers longer for her brain to deduce the truth. It naturally came to her, as she heard them moan in pain, seemingly unable to move. "You didn't want it to cut so it didn't cut. You pulled through and just… stopped them. Disrupted the signals to the brain, temporary paralysis. That's brilliant."

"That's crazy," Max said with a laugh, "But today's been a whole load of crazy…"

She sat herself up, grabbing a hold of the sword again. *Her* sword. "I'm glad we found each other…"

"So am I!" Lotto said excitedly.

"Not you, dummy, the sword!"

Lotto responded with a shrug. "Say," she asked, "when you get a second, can you use that sword? Still cuffed, here."

Max could help her with that. Lotto yelped as she felt the blade pass by her back, but her body wasn't so much as grazed. The cuffs broke in half, letting her sigh in relief. "Thank you."

"Thank *you,*" Max corrected.

Without another word, she looped the sword through her belt and let it hang by her side.

"Wait — before we go," Lotto said, grabbing Max by the shoulders, "I truly am grateful."

"For what?"

"For… making me feel less crazy. And for trusting me." She took a second to catch her breath, stepping back just once. "I don't know who I am. Not really. I know that I'm human, that I *should* be human, but I'm just not the person that I used to be. Something's happened and now I'm something alien."

"Are you sure you're not crazy?" Max joked, making Lotto chuckle.

"No, not really," she admitted.

"Well," Max said as she pulled her hoodie up. "I still need to get home, not sure how. Maybe you can explain things while you help me find the way?"

Lotto perked up, surprised by the offer. The idea of leaving these men on the beach felt wrong, all of them struggling to recover… But Max and Lotto would be long gone by the time they were mobile again. "Well if we're walking the same way," she said.

Max smiled, the first member of her court recruited. "Come on Merlin."

"Merlin?" Lotto asked, bewildered.

"Every King needs a Merlin," Max said, walking back into the woods.

Lotto followed.

* * *

The Captain woke up face down in the mud, groaning in pain. He slowly curled up onto his knees, the mud digging into his fingernails, as he finally caught his breath. For a second, he was confident that he'd been cut open by that child's sword, but there wasn't so much as a scratch on him. Not counting his own dignity.

He looked up and expected to see the shore with his men, but he was alone. He was back in that forest, late at night. He dug his fingers into a tree so he could stand, his whole body sore as he tried to relax.

The buzz of his radio called his attention again. He snatched it off his vest and turned it on. "Hello Patch."

"What happened?" She growled through the radio, "You've been offline for an hour. Over."

"I found the girl," he updated, "running with a woman from the facility but nobody I recognize. Ginger woman."

"That! Doesn't! *Help* me!" she yelled back at him. "Did you get either of them?"

"Negative, they got away. Over."

He could hear her frustration down the radio. The worst thing he could do was add to her frustration.

"Ma'am, there's more," he added. "Something's happening. I just got pulled into a puddle and ended up on an island. Can you explain? Over."

"Negative," she shot back, but her frustration vanished. She sounded colder. "Bring me back both of them, track them down. That's your mission from now on. Are we clear?"

He didn't have the energy to argue. He barely had the energy to stand, let alone figure out what was going on.

"Yes ma'am. I'll track them both down."